

## **Evaluation of the Vice President's Conversation on the Future of Extension**

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### **Introduction**

In 2014, OSU Extension celebrated 100 years of serving Ohio communities. After reflecting on the accomplishments made throughout those 100 years, the organization decided it was time to start thinking about the direction it would need to go in coming years to continue to make positive impacts on Ohioans. A conversation focused on the future was envisioned by Dr. Bruce McPherson--then Vice President of Agricultural Administration and Dean of the College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences—as a way to help the organization more effectively prepare for the future. A steering committee was named by Dean McPherson to lead the project, which included members of the organization who worked at the county, regional and state levels of OSU Extension. The conversation focused on the following: “What will be the most challenging trends and issues for Ohioans by the year 2035; and what are the best opportunities to leverage the strengths of the university and OSU Extension to address those issues?”

The effort became known as the “Vice President's (VP) Conversation on the Future of Extension.” The effort involved numerous planning meetings, focus groups, interviews and conversations that provided the committee with an understanding of important issues, trends and societal drivers within Ohio. These conversations involved extension personnel, policy makers, community members and external stakeholders. Once the results of these conversations were compiled, the steering committee was able to communicate these findings and possibilities they observed for the future to OSU Extension personnel.

In December of 2015, results of the VP Conversation on the Future of Extension were shared at the Annual OSU Extension Conference. Study outputs were released to the extension community, which included a fold out pamphlet, trend papers, a full report and new Impact Areas that would guide the programmatic direction of OSU Extension.

A year later, conversations within the extension community indicated that the excitement surrounding the VP Conversation and implementation of its findings may have died down. It appeared that knowledge had been gained, but it was not being applied. Perceptions were that extension professionals believed there were opportunities to more fully utilize the VP Conversation findings.

A need was observed to receive organized, concrete feedback on the VP Conversation to identify how extension professionals felt the project went, what could be done to improve it, and how the results could be more effectively applied to the work of OSU Extension. The observed led to the creation of this undergraduate research project.

## Purpose

The purpose of this research project was to determine perceptions surrounding the outcomes from the VP Conversation. The results of this research project could inform the future steps of the VP Conversation.

## Methods

- The undergraduate student was familiarized with the VP Conversation. This involved reviewing project outputs, including: Summary Report, tri-fold, Impact Areas, project notes, workshop presentations, Steering Committee Roles and Responsibilities, futuring dialogue instructions, and other reports.
- The research team brainstormed questions to be asked of study participants, which included members of the OSU Extension Administrative Cabinet and the VP Conversation Steering Committee. The questions were to guide a one-on-one interview that would not exceed 30 minutes.
- The questions were discussed and modified by the research team. Three to five questions were chosen for each group.
- Four OSU Extension Administrative Cabinet Members and four VP Conversation Steering Committee members were identified and interviewed as participants. Interviews consisted of one-on-one conversations with the undergraduate student, in person or via phone call. The Administrative Cabinet was selected for this project to see perceptions of impact of the project at the state level and of those who may be spending more time directly implementing the ideas into their work. The Steering Committee was selected to gain perceptions from those who were involved in the planning of the project and able to see the project's impact on work within counties.
- The following questions were posed to each participant:
  - Cabinet Member Questions
    1. **How has OSU Extension engaged in actively thinking about how it operates as an organization in the future?** What are specific examples of actions or decisions that have been undertaken by OSU Extension's Administrative Cabinet to maximize organizational impact (e.g. engaging, operating, etc) in the future at the county, regional and state level?
    2. **Specifically in relation to the VP Conversation on the Future of Extension, in what ways do you see the 'findings' from this project guiding programmatic emphases, decisions, etc. (e.g. health and wellness, resourcefulness, etc.)?** Please provide examples of programs and/or policies that were changed as a result of the futuring project?
    3. **How is the essence of this project being conveyed to new employees and stakeholders?**

- Steering Committee Member Questions
  1. **To what degree do you believe the concept of Futuring has been understood within OSUE?** Do you think people learned from this project? Please identify examples.
  2. **To what degree was everyone given an opportunity to contribute? Everyone?** Think in broad terms: steering committee members, stakeholders, clientele, and Extension professionals.
  3. **In what ways have people been talking about the project and utilizing what has been learned?** Can you give a specific example? If not, why do you think that is?
  4. **In what ways do you think this project made a lasting impact on the organization?** What could be done to expand the impact of this effort?
  5. **In what ways are OSU Extension professionals applying the findings of the project in programming?** Are your peers utilizing knowledge gained from this project? Have you seen them make changes (in programming, decision making, etc.) as a result of this project?
- Participant responses to the aforementioned questions were recorded and examined for common themes.

## Observations

### *Cabinet Members*

**Question 1 - How has OSU Extension engaged in actively thinking about how it operates as an organization in the future?** For cabinet members, all four participants indicated that they observed OSU Extension engaging in futuring, but identified differing avenues where this had taken place. Technology, the 100-year celebration, more proactive approaches to programs, and increased conversations around innovation were mentioned.

**Question 2 - Specifically in relation to the VP Conversation on the Future of Extension, in what ways do you see the ‘findings’ from this project guiding programmatic emphases, decisions, etc. (e.g. health and wellness, resourcefulness, etc.)?** Impact areas were mentioned by all participants as a way that findings from the Conversation were being used to guide program emphases and decisions. There was also mentioning of increased strategic planning, talk of innovation, and interdisciplinary work relating to the conversation.

**Question 3 - How is the essence of this project being conveyed to new employees and stakeholders?** Participants believed that the project needed improvement in conveying results to stakeholders. Many thought that, within OSU Extension, discussions were happening, yet the application of the findings was not there. Reasons for lack of application were thought to be changes in leadership and

lack of communication to new employees. A lack of communication to external stakeholders was also observed.

### ***Steering Committee Members***

**Question 1 - To what degree do you believe the concept of Futuring has been understood within OSUE?** Overall, participants thought there was at least an awareness of the project within OSU Extension. However, committee members, cabinet members, and county directors are believed to have a higher understanding of the project when compared to other OSU Extension Employees. Confusion with direct terms and concepts related to the project (i.e. futuring, strategic planning), failure to see application, or fear of change that may have prevented the project being more fully embraced.

**Question 2 - To what degree was everyone given an opportunity to contribute?** Overall, participants would have liked to see more opportunities to get OSU Extension employees involved in the project. Although surveys, focus groups, discussions, and workshops were available to all OSU Extension employees, some may have seen transportation and time as a barrier to participate, or felt left out. One participant mentioned that they would have liked to see more people involved outside of Extension.

**Question 3 - In what ways have people been talking about the project and utilizing what has been learned?** Committee members across the board felt the project was not being utilized to its fullest potential. Reasons for this mentioned were: not hearing about the project anymore, changes in leadership, employees being overwhelmed by the needs, lack of funding, and fear of change concerning the structure of OSU Extension.

**Question 4 - In what ways do you think this project made a lasting impact on the organization?** Lasting impacts of the project on the organization were observed. These included more intentional goal setting, more innovate extension events, and changes in the annual conference. However, there are more opportunities to inform new employees of the concepts and findings.

**Question 5 - In what ways are OSU Extension professionals applying the findings of the project in programming?** Overall, committee members felt that OSU Extension has not been applying the results of this project in programming as much as it could be. It was observed that educators are still unsure when to retire programs, committee members are unsure if people are applying what they learned, trend papers are not being used, and the paradoxical tensions are not being directly addressed by the organization.

## **Discussion**

Overall, participants saw value in the VP Conversation and the study outputs that were produced by it. A shift in the organization's thinking toward the future, rather than reacting to crises, was observed. There are also new Impact Areas and more formal conversations surrounding the future happening within the organization, especially by county directors. However, there is still work to be done.

Several issues with the VP Conversation were identified. Discussion and utilization of knowledge gained from the VP Conversation has been observed as minimal to none. Confusion surrounding the concepts of futuring and visioning are still believed to exist within the organization. In addition to these issues, lack of application of knowledge gained in daily work and fear of change in the structure of OSU Extension were observed as well.

## **Implications**

OSU Extension should work to increase education surrounding the VP Conversation and how to use the resources that it produced. It may also be beneficial to address the VP Conversation again and re-invite those who may have felt left out to become more involved. Because so many study participants felt things were missing from this project, it seems crucial that administrators continue to seek employee feedback surrounding futuring and strategic foresight within OSU Extension.

Cabinet members and administrators of OSU Extension may need to brainstorm ways to revitalize the concepts and ideas surrounding the VP Conversation and use it to its fullest potential, possibly by developing new curriculum and programs. It may also be beneficial to continue to educate not only about this program, but also how it could directly benefit participants, and how to integrate effectively integrate it into their daily work.